

## Construction Begins on Major Broadband Deployment Project in the Coalfield Region (Sept 25, 2006)

### STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN RICK BOUCHER

Coalfield Coalition Fiber Optic Backbone Groundbreaking

Claypool Hill, Virginia

September 25, 2006

I am pleased to return to Claypool Hill today for the construction start on one of two major fiber-optic backbone installation projects which will deliver high-speed Internet access throughout much of our coal-producing region.

Today the Coalfield Coalition, a non-profit organization comprised of the LENOWISCO and Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commissions, will begin construction on a project to deploy high capacity optical fiber along 160 miles of corridor in Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Tazewell and Wise Counties, interconnecting the 2 existing fiber backbones, which are operated by the LENOWISCO and Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commissions and bringing affordable broadband services to additional communities.

Today's events mark a major step forward in our efforts to deploy high speed data, voice and video services throughout our region as a means to spur economic development. The total cost of the project is \$6 million, \$3 million of which is federal funding supplied at my request by the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration, and \$3 million of which has been supplied by the Virginia Tobacco Commission.

Approximately ten years ago, I encouraged local governments throughout the Ninth District to find a means of deploying broadband networks so that affordable high-speed Internet access would be available to businesses and residents throughout our region. My goal in making this recommendation was to set our region apart in comparison to other rural areas of the nation, to make us more attractive than the typical rural region to industries looking to expand their operations into new locations, and to create technology-based jobs for Southwest Virginians.

The Cumberland Plateau and LENOWISCO fiber optic backbones, which have been deployed in the past several years with federal funding assistance, are two shining examples of the great strides which the communities in our region have taken in deploying broadband services, and today the availability in many of our localities of fiber optic backbone services is attracting substantial numbers of new jobs. It was the presence of the high speed backbone that enabled the more than 700 new technology based jobs that are arriving in Russell County with CGI-AMS and Northrup Grummon. In Russell and Tazewell Counties alone, more than 90 businesses are now receiving high speed Internet service because of the presence of the fiber backbone we have in those communities.

Today's celebration marks an even greater stride in our broadband deployment efforts. With the project we launch today, we will extend the existing Cumberland Plateau and LENOWISCO backbones into new communities in the coal producing counties and link the two existing networks together in two locations.

In Russell County, the Cumberland Plateau fiber optic backbone will be extended along Alternate Route 58 from Hansonville to Castlewood. In Tazewell County, new fiber will be buried along Routes 19 and 460 from Claypool Hill, where we gather today, to the Town of Bluefield. The backbone will also extend from the Town of Richlands, where it currently terminates, into Buchanan County through Vansant and the Town of Grundy by way of Route 460. From the intersection of Route 460 and Route 83, new fiber will be buried along Route 83 into Slate Creek to the University of Appalachia's School of Pharmacy.

Earlier today, we broke ground on the LENOWISCO fiber optic backbone extension into Dickenson County and new communities in Wise and Lee Counties. In Lee County, fiber optic cable will be buried along Route 58 from the Town of Jonesville to Rose Hill. In Wise County, the backbone will be installed from St. Paul to Coeburn along Alternate Route 58. From Coeburn, the fiber will be installed to the Lonesome Pine Regional Technology Park in Wise. The backbone's route will then follow U.S. Route 23 through the Town of Wise to Pound. From Pound, fiber will be buried along Route 83 into Dickenson County to the Town of Clintwood.

In total, the fiber optic backbone will be established along 160 miles of the Virginia Department of Transportation's right of way. Construction is expected to be completed for the entire project by the summer of 2007. Following the installation of the fiber, the Bristol Virginia Utilities Board, which will sell services to subscribers, will connect interested businesses who are located along the route of the backbone. With a connection to the backbone, businesses will have access to high-speed Internet services, which are currently unavailable in many areas. Digital television and telephone services will also be available. Over the longer term, more businesses and homes will be linked to the fiber optic backbone.

Just as first canals, then railroads and then highways were the major arteries of commerce in earlier eras, in the 21st Century, access to broadband will be a defining feature of economic success for rural communities. Step by positive step, our expanding fiber optic infrastructure is assuring that Southwest Virginia's communities will be at the center of economic opportunity.

I would like to take the opportunity of these remarks to recognize several individuals who have been instrumental in securing the funding necessary for this excellent project.

Paul Buchanan, Chairman of the Coalfield Coalition, and other Members of the Coalition, deserve thanks for their leadership and foresight in bringing this opportunity to the region.

I also want to commend the outstanding staffs of the LENOWISCO and Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commissions for the work they have done to plan the networks and assist with the funding applications for this large broadband development project. The foresight of our PDCs is much appreciated and is making a genuine difference in promoting economic growth in the region.

I want to recognize Wes Rosenbalm, General Manager of the Bristol Virginia Utilities Board and Jim Kelley, Director of Telecommunications at BVU, for their efforts. BVU will be managing the construction of the backbone, and I am confident that this next phase of development will go smoothly in their capable hands.

I would also like to thank Paul Elswick with Sunset Digital for providing broadband services in the LENOWISCO area.

Neal Noyes, former Virginia State Director for the programs of the U.S. Economic Development Administration is to be commended for his able assistance in processing the application for these funds and for his continued efforts on behalf of the many communities of the Ninth District in his new job as Executive Director of the Virginia Tobacco Commission.

I also want to thank William Wampler , Phillip Puckett, Joe Johnson and Terry Kilgore who are members of the Virginia Tobacco Commission for the large matching grant which is being provided for the project. The promise of a sizeable allocation of local funding provided a significant boost to the federal funding application.

Finally, I want to thank my District Director, Laura Lee, for her persistent and persuasive efforts in aid of this project. Laura's diligent work has been vital to securing the federal funds, and I thank her for this success.

The linking and expansion of the Cumberland Plateau and LENOWISCO fiber optic backbones marks another major step forward in our efforts to improve the quality of life for Southwest Virginia residents. I want to commend all here for the success of this project and offer special congratulations to the residents and business owners in Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Tazewell and Wise Counties who will benefit tremendously from new access to broadband services.